

The Sun.

BOOKS AND THE BOOK WORLD

SIXTEEN
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SECTION
SIX

Another Robert Chambers

He Imitates the Earlier Roberts in Writing a Five-Reeler With Lots of Pistols and a Carrier Eagle

MANITOU was an accomplished eagle, of the American or bald variety. He belonged to Sir W. Blint, Bart., who had run across him as an eaglet in the States. Requested to cheer for king and country, Manitou would oblige with *houp-gloup-houp*. Accused of being a German eagle, he would hang his head and moan. Reassured, he would right his aquiline visage and *houp-gloup* superbly for Uncle Sam.

He did all this to entertain Sir D. Haig, who was convulsed, as Sir W. Blint recorded in his diary just before mounting his scout plane to explore a twenty-seventh canton of Switzerland, unknown to the cartographers, lying between France and Germany and suspected of being as full of Germans as country store cheese of unpleasantness, and in much the same way.

For that canton contained the Great Secret of the German High Command, a tunnel under Switzerland into France, no less—through which Belfort, Nancy and Verdun could be outflanked. It had been started in '71. Lunatic labor from German asylums was digging it. Its existence was known only to the German High Command, the German secret service, the secret services of Great Britain and the United States, Our Hero, Our Heroine and the author. In fact, at the time of Manitou's convulsion of Sir D. Haig it was only dreamed of, outside Germany, by the secret service of Great Britain, Our Hero and the author—and Our Hero was languishing in a German dungeon, where they gave him nothing but spirits to drink, hoping to loosen his tongue and betray him into telling them what they already knew. (Tirpitz had been for destroying him out of hand, but milder counsel had prevailed in favor of having him spurlos versenkt in schnapps.) As for the author, he was busy writing an Exquisite, Virile, Wonderfully Fascinating Novel, and could not take time off to intervene. And the tunnel was nearly completed!

Sir D. Blint, with Manitou perched on the fuselage, flew over to look into it. A German airman got him and he crashed in the mountain forest. Stanch old Manitou—blessings on his bald head and his emblematic heart!—took up residence near the fatal spot.

II.

A year has elapsed. Our Hero, hereinafter to be known as Kay McKay, has escaped, dipsomaniac and disorderly, to New York, where Our Heroine, hereinafter to be cooed over as Yellow-Hair, has taken him in hand



and had him cured. And now, although the word "love" has passed between them but once, and well though McKay knows (if author and reader know better) that his schnappsful past and the lack of a chaperon have forever sealed his lips, these twain are U. S. secret agents camping together in the Swiss mountains, with several pistols apiece and a crate of carrier pigeons, and when they find that tunnel civilization is going to be saved.

Meanwhile three army divisions of Germans, disguised as lammergeiers, auerhahns and edelweiss, are stalking them day and night. Retreat is cut off. For her capture means a Fate Worse Than Death. It means this on every other page. In especially tender passages it means it even oftener.

Carrier pigeons are running low. One died, one the enemy bagged, the third is not what he was. How to notify headquarters that we have but one carrier pigeon to give for our country? Soft! What is this? By all the gods, Sir W. Blint, in a very bad state of repair! His diary! All about Manitou and Sir D. Haig! All about a further accomplishment of Manitou's; if you tie to his leg a whistling bell, whatever that may be—anyway, here it is—he'll fly straight home over

land and sea to the arms of Lady Blint. And a silver whistle—here is that whistle—will call him to you.

Courage, Kay McKay! Look up, Yellow-Hair! Stand up, audience! Oh, Say Can You See? *That's an American Eagle!* "Could it—could it be that dead man's eagle? Could it be Manitou? Could it, Kay?"

Well, as Mr. Stephen Leacock would say, could it or could it not?

III.

Yon flight upon the long wing of Cohan-cidence is possibly the gem of a new novel bearing a familiar trademark of authorship. Possibly, we hedge; our mind is not made up. Fine as it is, yet five or six thousand years from now, when Time, the great critic, has smelted away the dross and left the gold, the pundits may like better an earlier episode in the novel, a passage of arms and—er—limbs on a Scottish moor, where ten or twelve German assassins camouflaged as vulgar persons from Chicago have cornered Kay and Yellow-Hair on a rock beside a loch, and night falls heavily, and his pistols are "vomiting vermillion"; and he turns his back while she prepares to swim the icy waters and fetch him more cartridges.

Or perhaps they will prefer his subsequent fights in the mountains,

against camouflaged enemies with hand grenades, each side taking cover behind an Alp and firing at will. Or they may turn back near the beginning, to gloat over the lyrical incident on the liner crossing the ocean, where Kay, not quite cured, has his final dippy spasm and wants to jump in the drink, but can't, because "she clung the more desperately and wound her limbs around his, almost tripping him." Throughout, as throughout his later works, our author's delicate intimacies are as intimately delicate as ever squeezed the last delicious shiver cut of a high minded hero and heroine unchaperoned in a boudoir or a wilderness.

After these few hints—the case of dipsomania, the lips forever sealed, the delicacy, &c., not to mention the headline up at the top of this page—it were futile to try further to withhold the author's name. However, some years ago we left off connecting that name with a particular individual. Internal evidence prompted it. Anybody, apparently, can be Robert W. Chambers, on buying out the last Robert, the plant and the good-will. The thing reminds us of the Andrew Undershafts in a play called *Major Barbara*, except that here the succession is strictly business.

The original Robert was an idol of youth. Even then we idolized him less for what he was than for what his bespangled imagination promised to become.

IV.

But what did it not promise to become? In those days we used to murmur, "Meredith"; yes, we thought him as good as that, and although today we might exhibit more reserve, still, reading over *Cardigan* and a remarkable madness fantasy entitled *The King in Yellow*, we are not sure our verdant enthusiasm was as extravagant as it seems.

That Robert Chambers died. At least, nothing more has been seen of him. The immediate successor must have been an apprentice of his, for he had the same method, the same trick of dialogue, the same tendency to pile up ormolu filagree. What he did not have was the imaginative promise, so to save himself trouble he standardized his plots and even his titles; the pattern of the titles was *The Blanking Blank*. He prospered and presumably retired. Robert Number Three took over the shop and the machinery, exaggerated the decorative manner to a popular super-rococo, and went in for — But you know what he went in for. We cannot say what became of him. We lost track at about that point.

And now here is a fourth Robert, whose weaker hand tries to follow the traditions of the business, but who, for a line of wares, is reduced to five-reeler pistolic melodrama. We urge Mr. Douglas Fairbanks to secure the rights at once. Those patient Sierra foothills will make nice Alps to climb.

THE SECRET. By ROBERT W. CHAMBERS. George H. Doran Company. \$1.50.